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SOURCE Le Monde

NEWSPAPER CORRESPONDENT AT LEIPZIG FAIR
DESCRIBES LIVING CONDITIONS IN GDR

[Comment: Following is a summary of the first three install-
 ments of a five-installment feature article by Georges Penchenier,
 who covered the Leipzig Fair for the Paris daily newspaper Le Monde.
 The article was carried in the 21 - 23 October 1953 issues of Le
Monde under the title "East Germany Losing Speed." The three in-
 stallments summarized below contain information on living condi-
 tions in the GDR as well as observations on the Leipzig Fair.]

En Route to Leipzig

Once on the autobahn connecting Berlin with West Germany, it is ordinarily
 forbidden to stop along the 150-kilometer route or to turn off the road. The
 only exception to this regulation is the annual Leipzig Fair. For 10 days in
 the early autumn, the usually deserted south autobahn is traveled by curious
 diplomats, military personnel, and journalists. But their number is small, owing
 to the obstinacy of the Soviet authorities in discouraging visitors to the fair.

For anyone other than military or diplomatic personnel, it requires great
 patience to get permission to visit Leipzig. The interviews with the Soviet
 authorities are designed to discourage even the most resolute. They not only
 question your identity and background, but also your motives for visiting Leip-
 zig. Consul Panin, who is in charge of receiving foreigners at Berlin, is mag-
 nificent in his role, with his forbidding air and disturbing smile. There are
 many forms to be filled. (Even after 8 years, the forms still carry the name
 of the USSR instead of the GDR.)

Your reward, if successful, is a small slip of paper stamped "Gueltig nur
 fuer Leipzig" (Good only for Leipzig). There are rarely more than two or three
 Western correspondents who win the fight.

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Leaving the Autobahn

The fastest way to reach Leipzig is to stay on the concrete road, as ordered, while the long way to Leipzig entails certain risks. Since the riots in June and the American parcel campaign, check points have sprung up at the intersections along the eastern section of the autobahn.

The procedure for getting off the autobahn is merely to turn boldly into a side road -- for example, at Dessau. Five hundred meters from the autobahn is a sign in French and English, which reads: "Access to this area is forbidden to members of foreign missions or to any foreigner."

It is important to remember that there are certain traditions which, in spite of the change of regime, have not been discarded. Germany, respectful of regulations, believes others will respect them as well. Once a categorical prohibition is posted, it is incoercible that it will be violated. If there is no "schwarzer Vogel" (blackbird, a term for the People's Police) near the sign, it is safe to continue.

With luck you can drive 200 kilometers without encountering a road barrier. Even at a barrier, perhaps the People's Police will let you through on seeing the Cyrillic letters on your visa.

Interviewing an Innkeeper

The only way to arrange an interview in a People's Democracy is to meet people in a place away from listeners, to gain their confidence, and to let them talk.

I stopped at an inn in a small Saxon village, where I had to spend one half hour reassuring the innkeeper that I was not a Russian. She refused to sell me anything, even an egg. She explained that eggs must be sold for 15 pfennigs apiece in private commerce, while the HO (Handels Organization), a sort of official black market, sells them for 55 pfennigs. She had an acquaintance who was sent to prison, accused of having resold some cigarettes. So I gave her 15 pfennigs apiece for the eggs, and a tip which made up the difference.

Leipzig at Fair Time

Leipzig does not change from year to year. While other cities have built "avenues of socialism" and Moscovite skyscrapers, the Saxon capital has retained, in the midst of its still gaping ruins, the character of the small, bourgeois provincial city.

The officials of the fair are an unchanging group. There is little imagination here, hardly any initiative, a great amount of good will, and pounds and pounds of documents of no interest to anyone.

The lodging problem is acute. With the hotels filled, all Leipzig rents rooms. If you have arrived late, the choice is limited. While the foreigners' bureau assures you of a "modern room with running water," it is invariably only 4 meters square with no room to move about.

Leipzig comes to life at fair time, after 11 months of hibernation. Excitement is at its height at the station, where school groups and members of the FDJ (Freie Deutsche Jugend, Free German Youth) form in columns three abreast to march to the fair. At the fair, their instructors show them models of reconstruction projects and the vast Soviet exhibit.

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Worker and peasant delegations from all over "democratic" Germany come to marvel at the riches and activity in Leipzig. A special event is the arrival of automobiles carrying Americans in uniform. Pedestrians turn to watch these foreigners who, they are told, want to conquer the world.

Merchandise and Prices

When the state HO restaurants are crowded, foreigners can take refuge in a part of the Auerbachs Keller reserved exclusively for them. But the stores are never crowded. The time has passed when it was possible to find Saxon porcelain, furs, and fine paintings in Leipzig. The shops have only small stocks of poor merchandise, such as the inevitable wooden objects crafted by the Thuringian peasants in wintertime. Only Soviet soldiers and peasants from deep within the GDR go to the state stores, in search of things they do not have at home.

For every purchase made at the jewelers, the buyer must give a gold or silver item of equal value. Antique dealers are unable to replenish their stocks because the bourgeoisie has nothing to sell. Only two of the HO stores attract Western customers -- those which sell silks imported directly from China.

Prices are prohibitive. The East German mark, worth 20 francs in Berlin, is here arbitrarily rated at 110 francs, or more than the West German mark. Moreover, the Western mark is sound money, while the GDR mark represents almost nothing. Although West Germans are unable to go to Leipzig via Berlin, where they could obtain East German marks at the 20-franc rate, they must use the Eastern banks.

Exhibits at the Fair

The 1953 fair was somewhat more successful than preceding fairs. Not only were many more products displayed, but they indicated, particularly regarding agricultural machinery, great technical progress. The equipment displayed at the USSR pavilion proved that the Soviets can compete with other countries in any field.

At the Chinese exhibit, rather than admiring machine tools and looms, the public marveled at the multicolored silk fabrics, shells, ivories, and jades. The other buildings were no less crowded. The Poles sold vodka, the Czechs displayed a small sport aircraft, and the Bulgarians installed at the center of their pavilion a rose water fountain.

Western participation in the fair increases from year to year. There were more than 1,100 visitors from the Netherlands this year, as compared with only 300 from Great Britain and 150 from France. None of the Western nations has yet organized a national exhibit.

East-West Trade Restrictions

Most of the foreigners were satisfied with their visit, although they found great obstacles to even the smallest trade transactions. With trade agreements lacking, the Western buyers must contend with the complicated system of compensations for which they have to make the arrangements.

The Grotewohl government has decided to abandon the importing of capital goods, and intends to buy consumers' goods abroad. This cannot fail to interest the West. But compensations are still required, and the newcomers were poorly equipped for this. The Dutch, on the other hand, who have dealt with the GDR for years, increase at each fair the volume of their trade and frequently serve as agents for countries such as France.

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The Western embargo policy is definitely turning against its authors. Lacking purchasing power in the West, the People's Democracies have in recent years been forced to find their own suppliers. One example is the case of a Munich firm which used to sell oil well equipment to Rumania. The firm was forced to discontinue selling to Rumania, but when the restriction was finally removed, Rumania no longer needed its services, for meanwhile Hungary had developed an industry to produce oil-well equipment.

Difficulties do not arise exclusively as a result of Western policy. The exhibitors at the fair from the Eastern countries also face many obstacles. Eastern plants have no direct contacts with their buyers, but must deal through many intermediaries, and an unbelievable amount of red tape hinders all trade. In some cases, items ready for delivery remain for months in their crates, awaiting an order that is lost in some official's file.

Moreover, the lack of raw materials is a great handicap to the People's Democracies, at least the GDR, and frequently buyers interested in an exhibited prototype discover that the delivery date will be several years later.

Entertainment in Leipzig

For evening entertainment, in addition to the opera, theater, and concerts, there is the famous restaurant still known as the Antifa. Here the orchestra makes the windows shake to the rhythm of sambas, rumbas, swing, and other dance music ordinarily forbidden because they indicate degeneracy.

There are also crowded cabarets, where the chansonniers, to the great joy of the audience, make jibes at the sacrosanct institutions of the regime and say what they think of the HO. Some observers interpret this as proof that the government does not dare to intervene. Others believe that the government authorizes such humorous criticism to demonstrate that freedom does exist.

An Interview on the Road

On the way to Leipzig, I offered a ride to an East German engineer who had obtained a day off from his plant to visit the fair. He was delighted to have met a foreigner and immediately began to criticize the regime, describing the horrible political, economic, and social situations in the GDR.

The situation is constantly worsening and discontent is widespread. The workers are sick of norms and are resisting any increases. No one believes in the sincerity of the new government policy.

The engineer told me that the June riots were not intended to overthrow the government, and were far from an expression of a popular revolutionary movement. The people, he said, accept any government, right or left, authoritarian or not. According to him, the June uprisings were the result of the announcement of increased norms and lower wages.

Resentment Against the Regime

Complaints against the worthless money and poor merchandise are common, even at Leipzig. The people appear to have accumulated their resentment over the long winter months, to release it at one blow at fair time. Leipzig may appear to be well kept, well fed, and very pleasant, but the appearance is artificial. After the fair, the city returns to hibernation for another 11 months.

Never before has there been as much irritation as was expressed this year at Leipzig. Never have the people of the Soviet Zone been so eager to confide in foreigners, to complain, and to attack the government. The most curious fact

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is that this great discontent is developing at a time of improvements in the standard of living and when the government has declared a policy more lenient, more liberal, and more favorable to the peasant and small businessman.

Conditions have clearly improved since the inauguration of the new policy (11 June 1953) in East Germany. For the first time in a long while, food ration coupons are being honored. The meat ration is 1,300 grams per month instead of the former 900 grams. The sugar ration has been raised to 1,200 grams, which the grocer now hands over without argument, and the ration of fats is 900 grams, at least one third of which is real butter.

While the new government policy could have been expected to be successful, only 6 days after its inauguration the Berlin riots began. The people, after 7 years of timorous bowing to government decrees, suddenly realized that the situation had been reversed: the man on the street was now feared by the central power. This fact has not been forgotten. More and more East Germans today are refusing to be swayed by the government's self-criticism. A government which admits to having been misled is not liked, particularly in Germany.

Sabotage and German Youth

Sabotage is increasing in the GDR. More and more spies and saboteurs are being arrested. The information released by the GDR government to justify the repressive measures employed since June must, of course, be distrusted. However, one can believe the anti-Communist organizations in West Berlin and the Western special services, which say that, since June, many GDR young people have volunteered for espionage and sabotage missions in the GDR.

The measures taken by the Communists against the distribution of American parcels in West Berlin have a double purpose: to halt the onrush of East Germans to West Berlin, which shows too clearly the increasing opposition to the government, and to prevent the recruitment by the US of volunteer agents, who would be prepared to run any risks. Such recruitment is not difficult.

The youth are eager to strike, these same youngsters who had given the FDJ leaders so much hope. For the first time in 8 years, many of them realize that the new regime has not kept its promises. The romantic word, liberty, has taken on new meaning. They are reverting to the views of their parents.

Anyone who has attended several Leipzig Fairs will realize that this year something has changed between the Elbe and the Oder rivers.

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